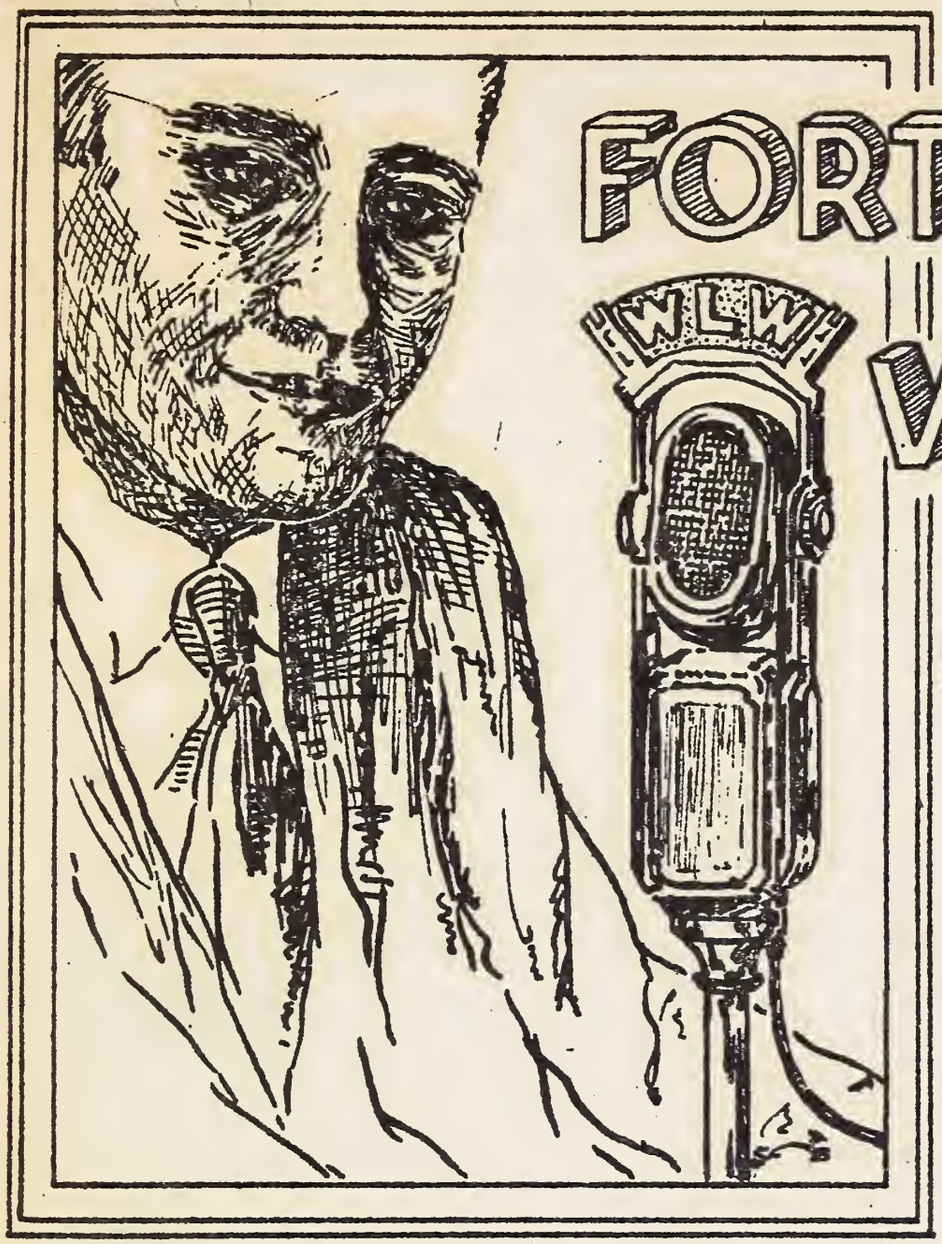

FORTUNES WASHED AWAY

A Series of Dramatizations of Better Land Use

No. 127 September 28, 1940 1:30 p.m.

"WHEAT FARMING"

W·L·W CINCINNATI

United States Department of Agriculture
Soil Conservation Service
Dayton · Ohio

SOUND: Thunder and rain...

ANNOUNCER

Fortunes Washed Away!

ORGAN THEME: I GET THE BLUES WHEN IT RAINS.

ANNOUNCER

Of all the cereals used for food by man, the most important is wheat. Wheat is an ancient crop, as ancient as agriculture. It grew as wild grass in the valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates, in the valley of the Nile. It was one of the main crops of the Israelites in Canaan. The Chinese called it "a gift from heaven." Today, it is grown in almost every country in the world, from below-sea level flats of Holland to towering mountains of Tibet and Ethiopia. And it is grown in America, where it has long been considered more than a gift--it is the crop that men said in 1917, "wheat will win the war!".

ORGAN: Brief Bridge.

ANNOUNCER

Wheat is important to America, to any nation. And these are true stories of men who grow wheat. The first story, from Idaho....

NARRATOR

I was on one of those milk trains they call a "galloping goose." Night was just about to break into day, and I sat with my elbow on the window sill, my cheek against the cold glass. About all I could see was the white tails of rabbits hopping clear of the car. All I could hear was the chic-a-put of the motor, and the snoring of an Indian who had climbed aboard a few miles back. And I got to thinking about a few days before....

SOUND: Door opens and closes...

DAD

Well, son...home so soon? How goes it?

SLIM

Not so good today, Dad.

DAD

What's the matter? You ought to give them that old stingeroo, the old one-two, the old approach, the gag about the man who....

SLIM

I know, Dad. I just guess I'm not much of a salesman.

DAD

Oh, don't worry about that son. After all, you're competing with hardened old men who have worked their territories year after year. And you've just been in the selling game for a year or so.

SLIM

I don't like it, Dad. Maybe I don't have faith in myself. And most of all, I don't have that "pressure" to put over deals with men who really don't want, or need, the stuff I sell. Honestly, I even walk past doors of customers that may even need my goods... don't have much confidence in myself, I guess.

DAD

Oh, tut tut! You'll learn.

SLIM (with hesitation)

Dad?

DAD

Yes, son...

SLIM

You remember that wheat ranch you traded for out near Holt's Point?

DAD

Oh, yes...I don't know how it'll turn out. I'm going to try to rent it to somebody.

SLIM

What kind of a place is it?

DAD

Oh, there's not much to it. All wheat and bunch grass pasture... has a good barn, just a shack of a house. About a dozen horses and mules, I reckon...a set of harness and enough machinery, and...

SLIM

Would you rent it on shares, or just how?

DAD

Why, I don't know. Most anyway, I guess. Why? Do you know somebody who wants to rent a wheat farm?

SLIM

Well, will you rent it to me?

DAD (sputtering)

What!!!!

SLIM

Yeah, me. I want to rent it.

DAD

Well, I'll be a....why, you can't run that ranch. You can't even harness a horse. Why, you must be off your...you must be...you...

SLIM

I'm serious.

DAD (softly)

I don't think you can swing it, son. You'd better stick to your selling job, settle down and marry Marie, and...

NARRATOR

And that was how it was, but finally I got Dad to let me try it. I knew Marie would stick by me...she always had..and she did this time.

ORGAN: Very softly behind...MARIE.

MARIE

I don't blame your dad, Slim...but if you want to see what you can do...

SLIM

You'll wait for me?

MARIE

Sure, Slim.

SLIM

I knew you would. And it won't be for long. Why, in a couple of years, I'll be a big wheat king, I'll be cleaning up hand over fist, and then...I'll send for you, Marie.

MARIE

Dear boy. You don't even know a cow from a cucumber. But I can understand how you feel. The blades of wheat, the tall grass... all contributing to the lifeblood of America. Farming is more tha just a living for you, and for me....it is the soul of this land of ours. Good luck, Slim, and I'll be waiting for a letter...to tell me that you've made good, and to tell me that I'm to be the wife of the greatest wheat farmer in all Idaho!

ORGAN: UP AND OUT.

NARRATOR

The train rolled along, chic-a-put, chic-a-put, chic-a-put. But it wasn't monotonous to me. I was looking out at the dawn of a new life for me. The dome of the sky took on color. I could see long twisting hills of sage and bunch grass now. Then...

OLD TIMER

Mind if I sit down with you, pardner?

SLIM

Heck, no! Sit down. My name's...well, it's Conrad Robbins, but everybody calls me Slim.

OLD TIMER (with a grunt)

Glad to know you, Slim. With 48 empty seats in this train, I just figgered that you and I might as well save some room by doubling up. (LAUGHS) Funny, huh?

SLIM

Very.

OLD TIMER

Going far? I don't mean going fast...this milk train don't even keep up with the turtles...I mean, going far.

SLIM

Holt's Point. I'm going to farm a wheat ranch out there.

OLD TIMER

Well, if that don't beat all. I'm going there myself. I was raised around there.

SLIM (with juvenile excitement)

Oh, you were? Tell me, how are crops...the wheat especially? I mean, is the wheat up? Do they have a good stand? Does it look like...

OLD TIMER

Just a minute, Slim...do you know anything about wheat farming?

SLIM (subdued)

Well, no...but I'm going to.

OLD TIMER

You say you're going to farm...do you want any help?

SLIM

Mister, I'll...

OLD TIMER

Can the mister stuff. I'm just Old Timer to everybody.

SLIM

Okay, Old Timer. But what I started to say was, Mister....I mean, Old Timer, I'll take all the help I can get.

OLD TIMER

I don't own no land. Never did, except oncet, and the dust storms got me. But I do know plenty about wheat farming. Don't reckon you'd want to take me on as a hired hand?

SLIM

Do I? Do I? Old Timer, I don't know how much you work for, and you don't know how much I can pay...I don't know myself, because I've never even seen the place....but Old Timer, from now on we're working together!

OLD TIMER

It's a deal, Slim.

SLIM (with enthusiasm)

and say...how many wheats are there in a wheat drill?

OLD TIMER (subsiding)

Oh, gosh all get out!

ORGAN: BRIEF BRIDGE, fading out as...

SOUND: Trotting of horses, pulling up as...

OLD TIMER

There she is, Slim. That's your ranch.

SLIM (sadly)

Oh! And that mass of unpainted boards...yes that must be a barn. No fence, no corral...

OLD TIMER

Yeah, kid...

SLIM

A shack here, a barn there....a few scattered remains of machinery. Well, Old Timer, this is some ranch!

ORGAN: BRIEF BRIDGE....

NARRATOR

Well, sir, I just sat glued to the seat of the wagon. My first impression of the whole thing was that here was the ideal "hangout" for the villain of a Wild West movie. Not a tree...except for one lone spindly box-elder. Then I got out and looked at the skyline...and as far as I could see were friendly acres. This was land--the soul of America. I didn't know anything about farming, but I knew one thing--I'd do all I could to keep that land in good condition.

ORGAN: HORROR CHORD.

NARRATOR

But many a sad month lay ahead....

OLD TIMER

The frost has been terrible, Slim. If we'd had a blanket of snow to protect the soil, this couldn't have happened. But the ground was bare. See here?

SLIM

Is it so bad?

OLD TIMER

Yep. The warm rain softened the top of the ground during the day, leaving the frozen layer beneath. Sometime during the night the frost crusted the top of the soft mud. The frosted earth held the roots, while the top crust held the stem...and she froze, breaking off the wheat below the surface of the ground. We'll have to re-seed, my boy.

ORGAN: BRIEF BRIDGE, fading as...

SOUND: Horses stomping around, harness rattling...

SLIM

Hold up! Hold up there! Wait'll I get this double-tree fastened.

SOUND: Sudden break of horses, running away...

SLIM (shouting at top of voice)

Stop it, blast your onery hides! Hold up...

SOUND: Horses fade into distance...

SLIM (philosophically)

Well. It looks like you have to be a combination of Thomas A. Edison and Ben Hur to succeed in this business. (AFTERTHOUGHT) Oh, yes, and don't forget Luther Burbank.

ORGAN: Brief Bridge, fading...

OLD TIMER

There she comes, my boy. See that dark sky!

SOUND: Start wind softly, increase gradually during following...

SLIM

Looks like smoke...oil smoke.

OLD TIMER

That's a d uster, a real duster. In a minute you'll see it spreading and rolling over these hills...and then, you won't see anything at all...(pause) except the land of some poor devil who forgot to anchor his soil.

SOUND: Up increasingly behind following...

NARRATOR

Half the sky was black and smoky and terrific....a roar like a kettle drum. The sun was long since out of sight. Breathing was almost impossible. Watch the farms go by, I thought. The air was full of dust and straw. Dust stung my face and hands. Dust, dust, dust....

ORGAN: DUST, up and drowning out sound, then fading....

(PRODUCTION NOTE: Gradually fade out both sound and organ, and silence. Then gently fade in....)

ORGAN: (Very softly: MARIE).

SOUND: Door opens and closes....

SLIM (off)

That you, Old Timer?

OLD TIMER

Who'd you expect, Santa Claus?

SLIM (Still off)

Why not, today is Christmas. Did you get the harness?

OLD TIMER

I got some harness you'll have to keep from now on.

SLIM (fading in)

Well, it'll have to be a lot better than this old stuff I had. Well, I just took care of the dishes and...(PAUSING) MARIE!

MARIE

Yes, darling....

SLIM

Oh, Marie...Marie...so you've come at last! To a farmer, too!

MARIE

Yes, I've come to a farmer...to be a farmer's wife, per instructions.

SLIM

Oh, darling, it's good to see you.

MARIE

And it's nice for me, Slim. You couldn't go to college, but you've got a bachelor's degree already...bachelor of wheat farming.

SLIM

Yes, bachelor of wheat farming. But no longer a bachelor, Marie... from now on you are to be the wife...of a man who has learned to farm.

OLD TIMER

If I may say so, I'd better look after the horses. The minister's on his way, Slim, and I'm sure he'll have more important things to look after than the corral. And if I may say so, Miss, this young feller who's about to be hitched up is a pretty good farmer. He farms the conservation way--and that's what we need in America.

ORGAN: UP AND OUT.

ANNOUNCER

That is the true story of an Idaho wheat farmer, who learned to farm in the conservation pattern. And now, for a story of an Indiana farmer, we turn once again to the Soil Conservation Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, and here is Ewing Jones.

JONES

Thanks, _____. For our second story of a wheat farmer, we go to Indiana, where C. E. Skiver, Purdue University specialist in soils and crops, has been working with wheat farmers for years. Without further ado, I'm going to ask Cliff Skiver to tell us about some of his observations.

SKIVER

Well, Ewing...I've been working with a good many different crops, but most of my work has been with wheat, which certainly is important to Indiana agriculture. It's so important, by the way, that one large milling company has financed a fellowship at Purdue University so that further studies can be made, to insure a permanent supply and a permanent high quality of Indiana wheat.

JONES

And just what have you found out about wheat, Cliff?

SKIVER

One thing that is highly important at this season of the year is that wheat makes one of the best winter cover crops for this region. But let's get specific--let's go down to Posey County, Indiana, and to the farm of Larkin Stallings. Stallings is one of Posey County's outstanding farmers, and he's a conservation farmer, too.

JONES

Yes, I recall the Stallings farm. Mr. Stallings is cooperating with the Wadesville CCC camp, and as I remember, his farm plan includes both terracing and strip cropping.

SKIVER

And wheat for winter cover. He's been a farmer in Posey County all of his life, and he's seen how the land has changed. He told me just the other day that the land is eroding more rapidly every year...that 50 percent of the land in the county has lost half of its topsoil...that the land now needs much shrewder management than it once did.

JONES

Yet that is the county that once declared "no county can boast of a greater variety of products, a soil of greater fertility, a climate more salubrious, a people endowed with greater energy, enterprise, and intelligence.

SKIVER

Yes, improper farming methods have let all too much of the humus get away, but the land has remarkable comeback qualities, and men like Larkin Stallings are demonstrating that. As to his wheat production, he is following the practices that give it growth....

JONES

....and those include?

SKIVER

Keeping high organic content in the ground is essential, and of course that includes liming. It's important to get wheat sowed at the right time of the year. It's important to have clean seed, and right now Posey County farmers are busy cleaning and treating their seed. It's important to go on the proper direction of the slope, so that the wheat stems, and even the tiny drill rows, act as little dams to slope up water run-off. As for phosphate, Stalling's wouldn't attempt to sow wheat without it. He has always taken pride in his wheat production, and that pride, I might add, is shared by his wife Mamie and his son Ivan.

JONES

And have his production methods borne fruit...or grain, rather?

SKIVER

As a politician would say, let the record speak for itself. He has never gone under 25 bushels except one year when his wheat froze out. He has won dozens of prizes at state and county fairs. He has won the sweepstakes at the Evansville Tri-State fair every year except one, and he once won fifth prize at the International at Chicago.

JONES

That, I would say, is a fair record, no pun intended.

SKIVER

He's constantly working to improve his production. He's adding humus by combining the wheat and plowing under the straw. He ran studies of variety plots, and he's come to the conclusion that fertility of the land is more important than variety. Just now, we're running tests on his farm to study the feeding habits of wheat, and I wouldn't be surprised that in a few years, we'll have some mighty interesting results.

JONES

A moment ago you mentioned the importance of clean seed, Cliff. That's for weed control, I presume.

SKIVER

Yes, that's why they clean their seed. Wild garlic is one of the most troublesome weeds, yet we know that it can be controlled. The necessary operations might be summed up as follows: prevent underground reproduction by plowing in late winter or early spring; plow the land early for two or three years in succession; and finally, a thorough job of covering all top growth is essential.

JONES

And good luck to you and your studies...our thanks to Larkin Stallings for his fine conservation work, and our thanks to you, C. E. Skiver, specialist in soils and crops at Purdue University, for being with us today.

ORGAN THEME: I GET THE BLUES WHEN IT RAINS.

JONES

This is Ewing Jones, speaking for the Soil Conservation Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, saying goodbye until next week, when we bring you another story of "Fortunes Washed Away."

ORGAN: UP AND OUT.

ANNOUNCER

Today's dramatization of the Idaho wheat farmer was adapted from the book, "Grains of Wheat", by M. C. Dubbé, published by the Caxton Printers, of Caldwell, Idaho, and the material was used by special permission of the copyright owner.

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